

Fashion Outlook

Loose colorful shapes WilliWear trademark

This was supposed to be an interview with Willi Smith, designer of WilliWear clothes. He wanted to discuss putting together a new wardrobe for "less than four nights on the town." Smith was too sick to keep our interview. He died, at age 39, on April 17. Not only was he a designer whom I greatly respected, but he was also a friend. I would still like to devote this column to Smith.

Raised in Philadelphia, Smith entered the world of fashion when he was just 17 and worked a summer with New York designer Arnold Scaasi. The artistic teen got the job because his grandmother kept house for a client of Scaasi's. In 1966 Smith won a scholarship to Parsons School of Design and worked as an illustrator for Bobbie Brooks sportswear.

Smith remembered these early days in an interview conducted after he accepted the Coty American Fashion Critics' Award for Women's Fashion in 1983. "After school, I used to sketch at Bobbie Brooks, and I would go in at night and supposedly make illustration boards for the designers," he said.

Smith, who at 2 had started to sketch clothes for paper dolls and imaginary animals, stressed "supposedly" because he would subtly change the clothes. The designers, he recalled, would say, "Wait a minute, where does that come from, that is not a part of the group."

Smith quit Parsons during his senior year to work for sportswear houses such as Jones New York and Digits. In 1975, his sister, Toukie, became his partner in a design company that soon closed because, Smith said, the young owners did "not know what we were doing businesswise."

navy-blue linen suit caused a stir at their wedding last summer, but as an observer said, "Well, obviously Schlossberg liked it. After all, he picked it out."

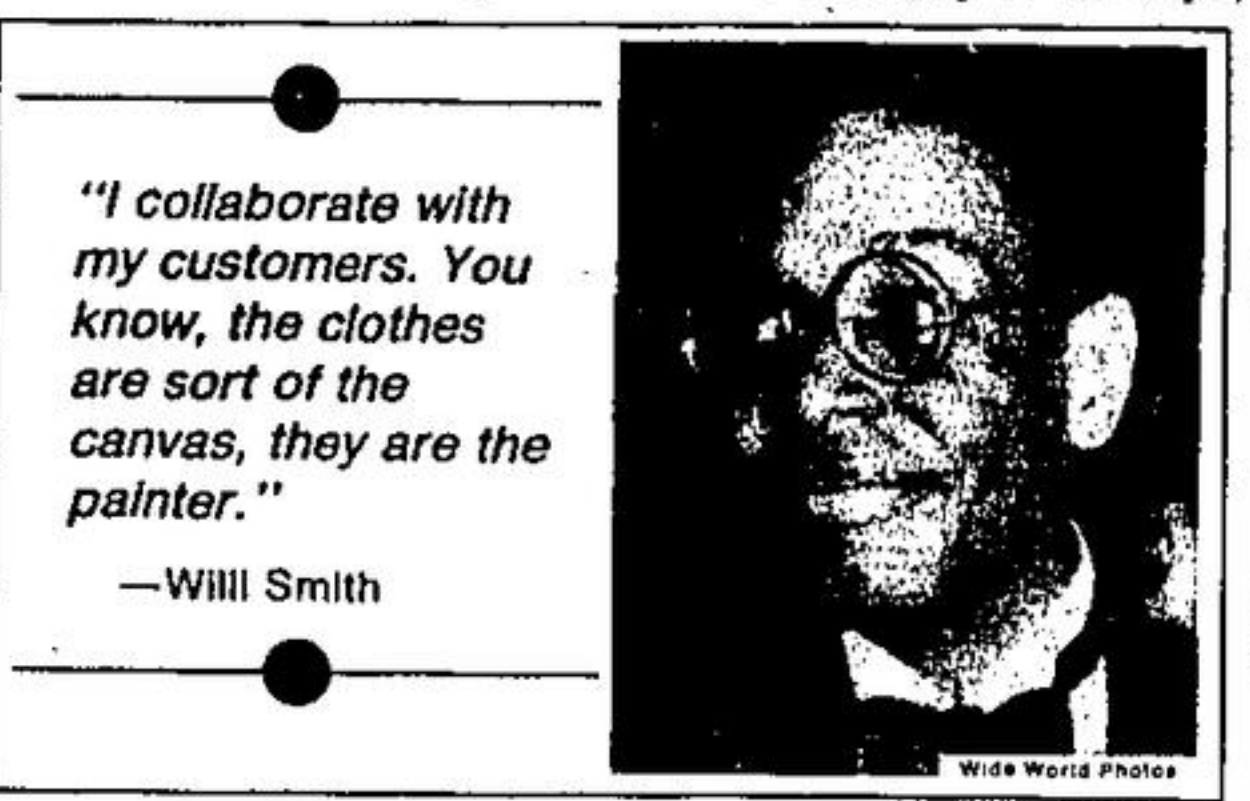
Loose, colorful shapes are a WilliWear trademark. Smith drew his inspiration from people — what they wore and what their lifestyles and

think he was in a class of his own, because he did fashion at a price. He really didn't have any competition because he did have his own point of view. He was one of the great American designers."

This fall, stores will carry clothing that Smith designed shortly before he fell ill. According to Ed Hayes,

pneumonia, and that is what killed him." The company, WilliWear, will con-

tinue to exist. According to Laurie Mallet, "I will continue as head of the design team and the company."



changing needs were all about. "I collaborate with my customers," he once explained. "You know, the clothes are sort of the canvas, they are the painter."

Kal Ruttenstein, senior vice president for fashion direction of Bloomingdale's stores, once said of Smith: "I

Smith's lawyer and personal friend, "The cause of death was pneumonia, and he had the AIDS virus. It was as a result of the body's weakening of the immune system that he caught this

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- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 tsp oregano
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 3 eggs
- salt and pepper

Mix all together; place in buttered casserole and bake at 325° for 1 hour. The biscuit will rise to the top. Note: zucchini can be substituted for the broccoli.

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FASHION

Mary Martin Niepold

One year later, he formed the company WilliWear. With new partner and president Laurie Mallet, WilliWear jumped from \$30,000 dollars in sales to \$5 million in its second year. Last year, WilliWear, available in more than 500 stores, earned more than \$25 million in gross sales.

Smith's witty and spirited sportswear quickly caught the imagination of buyers, press and customers. Smith's designs reflected a fun, street-wise style. Although priced much lower than couture creations, his clothes were covered by the international press corps. He frequently said that his goal was to design clothes for the people.

He attributed his success to achieving that goal. "Not that the other designers are not, but their customers are a little bit more separated from the normal public," he said. "I am the one who puts the clothes together for the people who basically want the look and want to be able to afford it."

His free-flowing clothes became favorites with people with a bit of confidence and a lot of joy for living. He recently offered oversized shirts with a repeating map that included a WilliWear park. He would dye his voluminous fake-fur coats lavender or navy.

Smith's clothes for men were also known for their easy, oversized proportions. A winner of the 1985 Coty Sark Award for Menswear, he didn't forego his basic concept when creating a wedding outfit for Edwin A. Schlossberg, who married Caroline Kennedy. Smith's non-traditional,

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